

## Shadows, Dreams, Shapes: The Lulik Reality

text: Pedro Rosa Mendes

photo: Wolf Boewig

**1. It's seven a.m. and the heat is already rising from the ground.** On the Metiaut road, called Robert Kennedy Boulevard, east of Dili, East Timor, lies a man, face down. His features can't be seen. He is alone in a pool of blood. Shortly before, three shots were heard, perhaps the same shots that frightened a figure that hides in the bushes along the berm of the road, panicked, unable to do what he intended: to come to his brother's aid.

There's a cellular phone next to the pool of blood. The victim called for help before falling unconscious to the asphalt. Three bullets from an automatic rifle, fired from less than 20 meters away, shattered half his right lung, severed vital nerves, grazed a vertebra, and completely separated two ribs from his spinal column, leaving them floating in his abdomen. The bullets exited through his

back, opening an ugly wound in the muscles and skin of the lumbar region. An ambulance arrives. An attendant lifts the body onto the stretcher and recognizes the face: the President of the Republic! José Ramos-Horta, winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, is taken to a military clinic at the heliport of the Australian troops. He will be operated on. The gurney circulates between the anesthesia area and the surgery ward. Between one and the other, in the brief time in the open, the president, motionless on the gurney, grimaced with his eyes. The sun's rays hit his face and he reacted to one last stimulus: light.



To the doctors, the president is between life and death.

To the dying man himself, however, he is closer than that: he is between death and life.

**2. In October 2007, a veteran of the Timorese resistance named Rio da Montanha, came to the city and announced the return of Vicente Reis, one of the fathers of the nation and of the short-lived First Republic in 1975.**

Rio da Montanha's announcement was heard by hundreds of people who gathered from throughout the country by the dry stream at Comoro and, setting up tents and killing buffalos, awaited Vicente Reis in an open field.

Vicente Reis, the second figure in the resistance along with President Nicolau Lobato, was ambushed by Indonesian troops in the south of the country in January 1979. Vicente Reis Bie Ki Sa'he (the name he took from his grandfather) died four weeks after the ambush from loss of blood and lack of medical care. He is buried in a mountain in Manufahi, in the south of the country, known as the House of Bats.



"The man doesn't live here. Only his name lives here," explained Rio da Montanha when I asked him how a dead man could come back. Vicente Reis's family considered the foretold resurrection "a hoax and a political conspiracy" and promised, if necessary, to display the martyr's skeletal remains.

"The Indonesian soldiers who found the body cut off one leg, to prove to the commander of the Indonesian VI Battalion that they had killed Vicente Reis himself," one of Vicente's brothers, Marito Reis, a former political prisoner in Cipinang, Jakarta, and a member of the present government, told me.

"The commander, who was waiting in the helicopter, told them the leg wasn't good for anything. He needed the head! But he left the House of Bats with nothing. Vicente's leg remained there."

In 2002, after East Timor's independence, Vicente

Reis's family organized a visit to the grave in the House of Bats.

"We found the grave at the foot of bamboo trees, started digging, and we found the bones" – with the left leg cut off. "The skeleton was removed and identified, missing one leg," Marito Reis told me.

"After the discovery of the grave, we cleaned the bones and put in a new lipa [a kind of shroud], with plastic, and left everything in its original spot."





The announcement that Vicente Reis was alive was accompanied by images from the 2007 presidential campaign of Francisco Xavier do Amaral, founder of the Associação Social Democrata Timorese and first president of the Timorese republic in 1975 (for nine days until the invasion). The images showed the supposed Vicente Reis, but a man named Manoel Escorial appeared days later on national television to reclaim his identity and denounce the “fraud.”

“He’s a man with two names. Manoel doesn’t exist. It’s Vicente. We verified that with Francisco Xavier do Amaral,” responded Rio da Montanha. “The two families, Vicente Reis’s and Manoel Escorial’s, have to decide who he is,” added Rio da Montanha.

On the day of the scheduled resurrection, the police dispersed the crowd. “Vicente Reis fled again to the mountain, with his family, out of fear,” Rio da Montanha said hours later.

Rio da Montanha is president of the Caixa, the clandestine network of couriers that operated during the Indonesian occupation and still exists. Next to the location of the Caixa, on a hill above the hundreds who were waiting for Vicente Reis, someone left a graffito on a small kiosk that summed up the Vicente case: “Wanted, Alive.”

In East Timor, unlike many places with fewer deaths, the dead persist in the enslaved memory of the living.

“The body may die, but not the soul,” concluded Rio da Montanha.

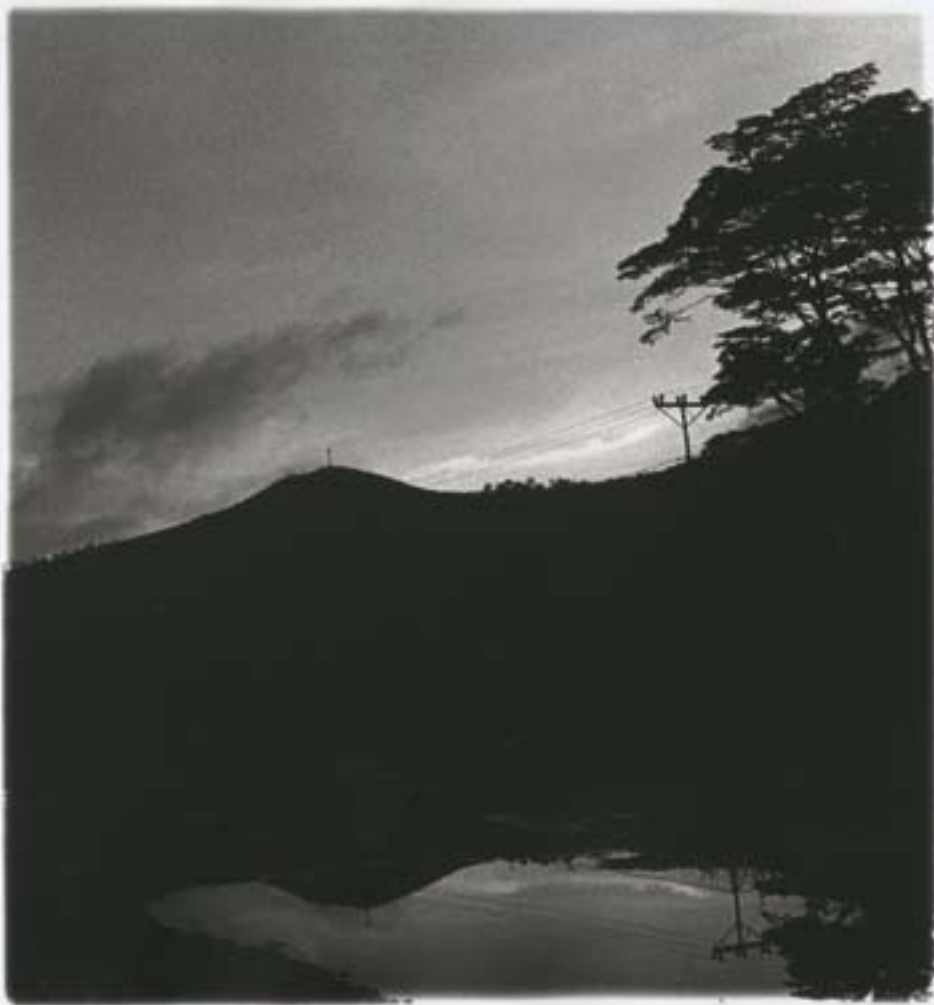
“If Vicente comes, I will embrace him,” explained President José Ramos-Horta with his customary sense of humor, adding that he also believed in the resurrection of Christ.



**3. In Timor, the dead are not the bodies that the living once inhabited. The bodies are buried, when there was the privilege of their being available for this.**

It was on bodies – and above all, on the female body – that violence was practiced, and it is because of this that in them violence rots into dust, or stone (like the punishment for the sacrilegious who break the laws that govern the universe in Timorese tradition). In Timor, the dead, or the part of them that survives, are the geography of their own relationships, in the literal sense of the word: the lines that establish contact between two points, two people, two lives. That line defines a concept of life as a symmetry, with two reciprocal locales. It is not the elimination of one of them that will make – just the opposite – the other lose the sense of where it is, or the place to which it belongs, and of where it is going.





Timor's tiny area houses a rigorous and indestructible notion of the place that every man occupies, in a twofold line: with the gods (a line with the verticality of mountains) and with others (a line with the density of blood). It is an intimate place, unique in time and space, which tells a story, bears dignity, demands honor. In Bauró, a few kilometers from Lospalos, in the country's eastern plateau, a carpenter, Egídio Gandara, told me how he managed to find his nephew Tomás again, who had been taken to Indonesia at the age of three, after the invading troops had massacred the boy's parents, both officers in Fretilin.

Tomás Gandara, a Timorese of Fataluco ethnicity, from a Catholic family and raised to speak Portuguese, grew up in Jakarta, in a Muslim Javanese family, who gave the child the name Tommy Abdurrahman. Abdurrahman grew up ignorant that within him was another man: Tomás. Fifteen

years later, through a series of accidents, his uncle succeeded in locating him in Jakarta and visited him. In other words, Abdurrahman was visited by his lost truth. He returned to Timor and Bauró, still under occupation, in 1994. He learned the national language and the language of the tribe. Two years later, in 1996, now twenty years of age, he went back to Jakarta as a young member of the Timorese resistance, to leap the wall of a Western embassy and request asylum in Portugal. He returned definitively to East Timor, already ill, in 2000. He died two weeks later and is buried beside the carpentry shop of his uncle, who offered his nephew – after his death – a blue car.

The car was parked next to Tomás's gravesite when, in 2004, I first visited Bauró with Wolf.

It is not Tomás's body that owns the blue car. It is his name, intensely held in memory by those for whom that name has meaning. The name has not

rotted. It inhabits the present, it is there. One must remember that, for Egídio, Tomás's body did not exist for most of the years when his nephew was, so to speak, biologically alive, for he was taken from Bauró as a child, without a trace. Under the Indonesian occupation, a kidnapping was equivalent to a death notice. Seen from outside, Egídio's persistence seems gratuitous. But the uncle finally found the nephew, and the nephew returned to his family and his tribe. That is, Tomás, the jewel of the Gandara family, lived only because someone kept him alive. Otherwise, he would have died at the age of three and in his place a youth named Tommy Abdurrahman, Javanese and Muslim, would have gone on.

It's shocking to hear how Tommy, visited at the age of eighteen by his Timorese identity, received it and returned to it, constructing it – because, in the end, the person that Tommy chose to be was a person

learned by the adult who had been lost to him very young. It is irrelevant to argue whether the Timorese identity was more real in him than the Javanese identity – whether Tomás, in that sense, was more authentic than Tommy. What matters is not to be found in the plane of authenticity but in efficacy: the original identity proved more powerful.

Egídio described to me the ceremony in which they bade farewell to Tomás in Bauró:

"Tomás's coffin was still on top of the table. We gathered around it. Only men. The eldest at the right side, and from him to the youngest.

"My father was still alive at the time. It was he who performed the traditional ceremony. The eldest is the one who speaks, speaking with the spirit of the ancestors. They brought in the dead body. They did some things that only the elders can do: to the body and to the coffin. With ribbons. The words: a kind of prayer.

"They speak. The words don't come out. Their lips move, but without sound. For an hour. The sacred words don't come out. All that is heard are the ones that aren't sacred."





**4. The Tata-Mai-Lau (2,963 meters) is the highest of Timor's peaks and, like others equally profound, is sacred, or religious, in the sense attributed to this word by Rudolph Otto in his influential book *Das Heilige* (from 1917, cited by the Portuguese poet and agronomist Rui Cinatti in the notes to his *Paisagens Timorenses com Vultos*).** "It denotes the confrontation with what is called 'Das Numinose,' implying simultaneously 'Mysterium tremendum' and 'Das Fascinans,'" terrifying yet alluring.

Tata-Mai-Lau means, in Cinatti's translation, "Grandfather's Peak." The large mountain is there to the side, three kilometers above sea level, well into the sky and the winds, evoking silence and inspiring terror – like everything, Otto would say, outside or beyond everyday experience.

In Catrai Lete, at the foot of Tata-Mai-Lau, an elder of elders, liurai among the liurais (monarchs,

chieftains) squatting on his heels, wrapped in cloths as if wearing a turban from head to foot, lifts his ragged, fragile voice before the tribe. It is not to the tribe that he speaks. It is through the body of those who surround him, and through the darkness that envelops them, that the elder communicates with those who, present in some other place – there – have centuries ago ceased to have bodies, listening (as tonight), in the memory of their many descendants, for the signs that rescue them from oblivion.

The ceremony of replacement of the feminine totem and the founding of the village's new sacred house takes place, the lulik.

The families, the village, the suco, the clan have come from different regions of Timor to be there, in the heights of Catrai Lete, at the feet of a symbolic mother: the mother, comprising in herself man and woman, to which the diverse group born in the villages traces its existence. There is a totem pole, a wooden pillar several meters tall, sacred in character. It points heavenward an invocation and a petition for forgiveness. On the ground it marks a possible center of the universe, and therefore of the life of each individual, a kind of hermaphroditic womb, where the members of the clan can read, on a coinciding plane, in their geography and their cosmology, the place that is theirs.

"May all love protect the coming generation through this symbol," the elder continues. The totem pole, the wooden mother, the hairy trunk, the tree with whitened skin from many monsoons: there stands an axis, in front of man frightened

before his fate, guaranteeing that darkness will not fall upon the clouds, entombing the gods. The hours go by with a precise whirl of words, protocols, gestures, and sacrifices, alternating between convulsion and trance, wine and blood, tobacco and whitewash (they can mask themselves together), applause and mourning, knife and oil, prophecy and legend. It is a dialogue between worlds.

"We are the children of the Sun! We are the children of the stars! We are the children of the Moon!" proclaims the elder in the Mambae language. "You have shown us that we exist. We are independent!"

In the Tetum language, ulu horis designates prisoners of war and the place where they are held. The expression also has a pejorative connotation: people without a past, without origin.

In Catrai Lete, the "song" of lineage and the totem pole are witness that, for tribes on the island, it is

more serious not to know where one comes from than not to know who one is.

The Timorese, “children of the sun and the moon,” have ancestral “songs” that define a territory, mythical to those who hear them, palpable for those born from them, a bit like the map-songs by which Australian aborigines invent their world, by saying it. In a country that has suffered genocide, memory is infinitely superior to loss. In Timor, many bodies fell (a third of the living...), but almost all the names go on, as firm as the totem poles that, atop peaks, signal the mythic affiliation of every man. I try to visualize the scope of that which, in Timor, exists only to the exact extent that it is spoken, because to speak is to convoke. And I see appear a sizeable army, even if its strength is merely a faith, perhaps merely a lie. The animism of the Timorese “represents only the expression of a state of the spirit,” Cinatti wrote

in 1987, “which does not distinguish between the procedure to be employed with people and the procedure to be followed with ‘things.’ All the outside world is treated by the Timorese according to the model learned in their relations with society, transferring to things life, acts, and emotions familiar to the sphere of human relationships” (“Arquitetura Timorense”).

**5. Father Jovito Soares, one of the members of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, a survivor who has no pity for his own pain, explained to me that “we can’t count on this generation.** Those who died, died like animals, they didn’t die like men. Only the future can restore their dignity.”



In East Timor, between Catholic faith and animist beliefs, the Day of the Dead also serves to reconcile a lost order, where those who escaped seem like the residue of those who disappeared. This abbreviated, almost vegetative survival, leaps to one’s sight in Florindo de Jesus Brites, from Maubara: the six machete blows he suffered in 1999 in the home of the Carrascalão family, in the worst massacre in the capital, left one arm shorter than the other, withered; he is missing the ring finger on his left hand; his right hand, without strength, is turned inward at a fixed angle. Santiago Cancela is another example of what can die in a man. A teacher for almost twenty years before April 1999, Cancela lost the ability to read because of trauma, following the same massacre of April 17, 1999. Manuel Carrascalão, “Manelito,” did not survive that slaughter. He was killed in the Carrascalãos’

large house in Dili, along with a hundred others, by integrationist militias. “Manelito’s killers were never brought to justice. The return of the President, today, is a resurrection, and this day of life serves us as redemption for the day of death we went through in 1999,” explains Natália Carrascalão, Manelito’s aunt and current resident of the house where the massacre took place on April 17. Natália is President José Ramos-Horta’s chief of staff. We are at another April 17, in the year 2008, and the president is coming back from Australia, and from death, in a charter flight carrying only 24. In the plane also is Manelito’s sister Cristina, Natália’s niece and protocol adviser to the head of state. In the final luncheon in Darwin before returning to Dili, the Timorese president had beside him the Norwegian bishop Gunnar Stalsett, who reminded him that “vulnerability is the characteristic of Christ.”

"It is by dying that we are born to eternal life," the Lutheran bishop read from a book of prayers, marked on a page of St. Francis of Assisi. The bookmark of the Franciscan prayer was a representation of the Orthodox monastery of Hilander, on Mount Athos, Greece, called "the Redeemer." "In a nightmare, in a dream, I saw two or three people whose faces I didn't recognize, trying to smother me to death," the president told me about the moment between life and death, between the anesthesia and the operation. "At one point I asked: 'At least tell me what I did.' Then a voice came, voice heavy with authority. The voice said: 'Let him go! He didn't do anything to anyone,'" the president continued. During the flight, a screen at the top of the cabin projects a live image of the nose of the airplane, captured by an exterior camera: a bit of propellers and the infinite.

The plane turned toward the east for the landing. It was not yet eight a.m. and the sun was not very high on the horizon. Spindlelike, the runway pointed toward the stars. Because of this, the screen now displayed a perfect framing of the asphalt disappearing in a ball of light, as in films about divine revelations.

**6. The lulik, which is divine or at least sacred, is the ancestral place in Timorese society that merges with inward power and the human condition.** Reality, including politics and its codes, does not exist outside the lulik. The Timorese inhabit a magical realism that for them is as palpable and evident as it is invisible or fantastic for us. The only honest convocation of this reality is through the lexicon and the voices that can put them in contact with faith, fear, trauma, perception, and rumor. With all, in sum, that we usually call fiction. And only in this amorphous zone can we experience that which is the sole valid function of the best fiction: transcendence, in itself an intervention into our human limitations.







...the tallest Grandfather thrusts the first dawn into the sky. I see light orienting time. Profound pinnacles: mystery, fear, and fascination. Sacred mountain. Righteous mountain. The ancestors descend the slope. They end in me. The children of the stars meet the children of the sea. They hang bodies on a headless trunk. I listen to the magical words: the cross bowed to sinners; the totem pole filled with names. Enclosed here: faces in shadow; pain in boxes; wood in wood. We are our shadows. Tombs on high. The tombs of giants. Inside them, we relearn the invocations to the gods from where we come: the stone, the tree and the crocodile, the green

snake that thunder scratches into the smooth face of the mountain. From the wound runs a river carrying all the silver of the moon. Half the island was left over; of our half we were left with the island. The blood of the buffalo, our sacrifice, will fertilize the rice, the corn, and the Job's-tears grass. The elders withdraw to the sacred house. They intercept the future over the ancestral rocks. History is not who was once here, it is that which we have passed through until now. The house is the moment. The generations-song awakens rotting dreams, startles the cruel dog, the bitter gaze. And the sacrilegious will be turned to stone.